

Romans 14:(7-9),10-13. 5th a. Pentecost (4th after Trin.) 19.6.2016

One in Christ!

[⁷ For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. ⁸ If we live, it's to honour the Lord. And if we die, it's to honour the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ Christ died and rose again for this very purpose – to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.]

¹⁰ So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For the Scriptures say,

“As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God.’”

¹² Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. ¹³ So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall. [NLT]

“I have a dream” - these words were famously spoken by Martin Luther King. Apparently those were not part of prepared speech, but they reflected what he believed in. For him the dream was that blacks be accorded equal rights - and that people would no longer differentiate on the basis of race.

I too have a dream - a dream that the one Church of Christ which we confess in the Creed, will find and live this unity. I am aware that this dream is even more difficult to realise than the dream Martin Luther King had - but it is a dream that has its basis in the fact that we have been made

one in Christ!

Having a dream does not mean that one is totally out of touch with reality - if that were the case civil rights in the USA would never have reached the stage they are at. The dream of church unity is not simply something some people wish for - it is a dream that has its foundations in the prayer of our Lord, “**that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.**” (John 17:21)

It is a dream that is expressed by Paul over and over when he writes, “**Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.**” (Ephesians 4:3); or: “**make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.**” (Philippians 2:2)

What does all of this have to do with the passage we have just heard? It seems a great deal, because the unity of the church is not only threatened by disagreements on teaching, but - probably in most cases - by everyday things and questions. The reason given for a split is portrayed as being a theological divergence, which in many cases may simply be an excuse for something quite different. Take for example the first major split between east and west in the church. The reason given for this split is the dating of Easter - but were there not actually centuries of enmity and cultural differences which separated these people?

In Rome it was the question whether one had to keep to the Jewish dietary restrictions, especially as far as meat was concerned. The question was whether Christians could eat of meat from the market, which had in many cases been slaughtered in connection with sacrifices to idols [only a part of the animal was burnt, while the rest was often sold at the market]? Was this meat not ‘contaminated’ because of the purpose for which it had been killed?

Some felt that there was nothing to this, while for others it was a real problem. Those looking for guidance in such matters, may have hoped that Paul would give a clear decree on how to proceed in such a case.

Who is in the right? That is a question we also have, as it was the case, e.g., at the recent Pastors’ Convention about how to deal with the remains of bread and wine at communion. In the end we agreed to respect the individual points of view. For the unity of the church it is not necessary that we must in all - external - matters have the same view.

Just to make it very clear: Paul is not speaking here about fundamental truths as they are expressed in the Bible. In fact, the earlier chapters of the Letter to the Romans lay out the teaching by which we are saved. In the latter chapters he then addresses questions of the Christian life - of how it is to be lived.

So it certainly is not a case of believing what you like. There can never be any question about the teachings of the Bible - when that has broken down there is no unity in any case! What our text is about, however, is that we do not raise

our point of view to the same standing as these Biblical teachings!

As Christians we have individual freedom, but at the same time a sense of collective responsibility. So while we may express our personal freedom, we are to always remember that we are bound together in responsibility to those who together with us belong to the church of our Lord.

So in questions concerning how we practise our Christian faith there is a great deal of latitude, it is not a simple question of black or white / right or wrong. Instead Paul places responsibility on each member of the congregation: we are to remember our position before God. This determines how we live, how we act.

So, if you thought, 'This is great. I can do what I like'. Think again! While you are free to be an individual, you are to be so in relation to God. He is to determine how we think and act - that is the only way to maintain the unity to which we have been called. So Paul closes this passage by saying, **So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.**

Not judging others, not looking down on others - much more important is that we don't **cause another believer to stumble and fall.**

The thing is, we all have been accepted by God, we have been forgiven and changed by his wonderful grace. Just as he has accepted us, we too are to accept others - with their weaknesses and strengths. As followers of our Lord we do not stand alone, we are called on to not only respect one another, but also to be considerate of one another.

I have a dream - and I trust that I do not stand alone in this. It is the dream that we live out our calling to stand together in Christ, as one body. It is a dream that we allow each other space to have different practices. As people of God we are to do all we can to help one another walk the path together, to which we have been called as the one people of Christ.